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ABSTRACT

Education is being constantly criticized for its failure to produce literate graduates. Reformers are urging a return to basics, a more rigorous curriculum, and results that can be measured on achievement tests. Vocational education also is being criticized. Opponents think that vocational education prepares graduates for a narrow range of job skills that soon become obsolete. To defuse such criticism and do a better job of preparing students for the future, vocational education will have to change. More emphasis should be put on preparing students for a broad spectrum of jobs and for the retraining they will probably face in the future. At the same time, vocational education will have to improve coordination of programs between secondary schools, community colleges, and vocational institutes so that students can receive the training they need without wasting time in moving from one program to another. Program planners on all levels must begin to work together to reduce institutional jealousies in order to provide coordinated programs that prepare vocational students for the future. If vocational educators do not improve articulation voluntarily, state legislatures will enact laws to force them to do so. Florida, for example, has enacted legislation that mandates coordinated programs between various levels and sets statewide standards for courses, while putting tighter controls on the offerings of community colleges and vocational institutes. Vocational education can meet the needs of students if vocational educators cooperate to increase articulation between and among their programs. (KC)

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"Curriculum Articulation as a Means of Meeting
the High Technology Challenge"

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AVA CONVENTION

Anaheim, California

December 4, 1983

A Speech by Mary Knight

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Not since the 19th century, beginning with free public education followed by the change from rote to experienced-based learning curricula, has there been a stronger reformist trend in American education. Not since Sputnik have we seen education so much on the public mind. As emphasis moves from national to state control, we see public concern with the basic skills of high school graduates reflected in the rhetoric of national studies, legislatures and governors.

There is a general concern about the literacy of both teachers and students. Competency testing for beginning teachers is already in effect in Florida and California. And vocational teachers are having problems with these tests. Arkansas teachers must pass a test or return to college for further training. If they cannot pass the test by 1987, they lose their jobs.

Students must pass tests before entering high school, before leaving high school, before moving to the upper division of universities and at various points in between, depending on the state. Candidates applying for admission to schools of education must pass entrance exams. And schools of education are being attacked for not offering more difficult curricula.

More stringent high school curricula is going into effect at the behest of legislatures. The most difficult of these will include four years each of math, science, English, social studies and 2 years of a foreign language, leaving no

time for vocational education and other electives. However, this problem may be alleviated by another proposed change - to lengthen the school day and year. Even if a less rigorous curriculum results, there is reason to expect a one-track curriculum for all students - the argument being that vocational students are said to be short-changed academically when they follow a separate track. A curriculum devoid of college preparatory courses is said to restrict the students' future options so that they are not prepared academically to climb a career ladder later in life. The plight of auto workers who do not have the reading and computation skills to accept retraining, has been given as an example at hand.

The Carnegie Report, the National Science Board Report and John Goodlad are all saying that vocational education should eliminate courses that teach narrow marketable skills and prepare students for a broad spectrum of jobs. The National Science Board goes so far as to say that teaching job-related skills to high schools students is ill advised. And the Carnegie report says that vocational education is a disappointment when it comes to properly backgrounding students for specific jobs. Goodlad, a true friend of vocational education, advises us to look at a broad-based occupational preparation so that students can adapt to change and be prepared to accept retraining, since they change jobs several times during a life time. An allied health aide program in Illinois, which meets this description, was described in the December issue of the AVA Journal. Other states would do well to follow their lead.

However, vocational education is recognized as making a positive contribution to student education. Goodlad points out that vocational education uses student-centered rather than teacher-centered instruction so prevalent in academia. He also points out that we respond to student learning styles and capabilities and that students find vocational programs interesting. The Carnegie Report notes that 75% of all students take at least one vocational course in high school and that these courses tend to hold students in school. We need to accept these

accolades gracefully, face the criticisms, directly, and find solutions to the valid ones.

Perhaps the most justified of the accusations is that vocational education wastes resources - not just supplies and equipment stored in warehouses after programs are closed - but the time and money of both students and government. In other words, curriculum articulation is lacking in vocational education. This term refers to the process through which students are able to move from one level of education to the next with a minimum loss of time. There is, of course, considerable program duplication in U. S. high schools, vocational centers, community colleges and/or universities. Students tend to lose credit when transferring to almost identical vocational programs in other schools. A student moving to a higher-level program in the same field almost always duplicates learning experiences at the new institution.

A lack of cooperation between and sometimes within institutions inhibits the development of a coordinated curriculum. Some faculty and administrations, fearing loss of autonomy or job security, throw up roadblocks when coordination of effort is proposed. Consortia have made some progress in this area, but invariably have to deal with obstructionists. A successful example is the Agassiz Region Nursing Education Consortium in Minnesota and North Dakota. Here Licensed Practical Nurses are able to advance through an Associate in Nursing program with ease. One reason for the success of this effort is that there was no preexisting Associate Degree program. This meant that the Associate Degree faculty knew when they were hired that articulation would take place. Unfortunately, elsewhere intransigent faculties have been known to kill articulation efforts. However a plus factor is the fact that the allied health professional organizations which accredit programs and certify graduates set program standards. This standardization is conducive to articulation between programs in a few health occupations.

But turf continues to rear its ugly head and students in vocational programs still find it difficult to transfer with full credit even from one community college to another - much less from a vocational school to a community college or a community college to a university. This type of turf defense has been encouraged by the autonomy of community colleges, school districts and universities.

This is all changing. The Florida legislature, for example, has mandated the development of state-wide program standards. Vocational programs are being assigned to either community colleges' or vocational centers to avoid duplication of effort within a community. Coordinating councils within each community college service area are now made up of 51% industry representatives. These councils decide if new programs should begin. If placement rates of vocational completers fall below a designated percentage for three consecutive years, the program will be closed. The community colleges, which have been particularly autonomous, will now be regulated by a board of regents.

A state-wide common course numbering system in Florida now assures equal credit for community college and university courses, particularly in the academic areas. This system is being extended to vocational courses. Eventually a school will not be able to capriciously refuse transfer credit. The Florida legislature has already mandated articulation in a general way. There is every indication that a prescriptive plan to articulate vocational programs will evolve this year.

If your legislature has not yet shown an interest in vocational curriculum, I feel safe in predicting that help is on the way. I perceive that we have two choices. One: withdraw into an armed fortress and await the onslaught. Two: admit to the weaknesses in the system and set about rectifying past mistakes.

The Carnegie Report implies that vocational educators and administrators have vested interests and are impeding change. There's just one way to change

that image - to develop a strong partnership between school districts, community colleges, universities, business and industry.

We can begin by talking with each other. Intra-institutional curriculum committees need to be formed. Vocational faculty need to be involved in the decision-making process. We need to be present when math and science are criticized for spending too little time on hands-on experience. We need to be prepared to emphasize the importance of application of learning. One cannot assume that when students learn science they have learned technology. Vocational education is an appropriate medium for teaching math and science concepts. What better way to drive home didactic concepts of the function of the heart than to have students dissect a beef heart and learn to do blood pressures and pulse.

We need to develop innovative programs and interdisciplinary programs. The allied health aide program is an appropriate medium for preparing students for a broad spectrum of health occupations. Such a program can meet student needs while responding to criticism. This program should carry a heavy anatomy and physiology component and be submitted as a high school science credit.

We need to identify the contributions vocational education makes to the general education of students. One important change facing Florida is the mandate that academic remediation be withdrawn from community colleges and universities. Therefore, vocational centers will become, of necessity, more involved in remediation. I've been told by a carpentry teacher that he can teach a non-reader to read blue prints and a student with a math hang-up to use trig for practical purposes. We must capitalize on this concept. Instructors and students say that sending a student to a learning laboratory, divorced from the vocational program, is not effective. We need to listen carefully and begin more remediation within the confines of the program.

We must give serious thought to the criticism that we train high school students for narrow marketable skills while not preparing them for a life of work and learning. The Carnegie Report urges us to embrace a broad spectrum of training opportunities so that students will be able to accept retraining as their jobs become obsolete.

For several years we've been told that hi-tech, especially in the defense industry, would provide the jobs of the future. This simply is not true. The Bureau of Labor Statistics says that by 1995, only 15% of the work force will be employed by the hi-tech industry. Of that only a small percent will be in high-paying jobs. Most will hold minimum wage jobs - that is until they are replaced by robots. Our graduates must be prepared to learn new skills several times in a lifetime just to remain employed.

The ambitious will always return to us for more education within the same field. It is our responsibility to help them make the transition from one level to the next. If articulation is to become a reality, faculty and administration must put aside turf and communicate between and among vocational centers, community colleges and universities. Administrators need to become role models of cooperation. Interinstitutional curriculum committees need to examine existing articulated curricula and faculty members need to be give release time to pursue these efforts. While formal agreements must be formulated eventually, cooperative efforts tend to flourish in an informal setting where innovation and creativity is encouraged. Advisory committees need to be involved in planning curricula based on industry job requirements. Guidance counselors need to be kept informed and vocational faculty should work at developing rapport with this group. Far too often, an adversarial relationship exists between vocational faculty and guidance.

Until recently articulation has been a local problem. But recent developments indicate that local institutions no longer have a choice. If your state has not yet felt the strong arm of the legislature, I would venture to say that it will soon. Since student competency, waste and inefficiency in education is foremost in the public mind, we can expect their concerns to be reflected in legislative action.

An encouraging note is that the public seems willing to pay more taxes to raise the standards of education. According to the 15th Annual Gallup Poll of public attitudes toward public education, most people expect that by the year 2000 more emphasis will be given to vocational education in high schools. We still have a lot of friends out there! If we're willing to make necessary changes, vocational programs will have an increasing impact on education.